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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2016
TAGS: PREL OSCE PGOV GG
SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIA TALKS AT AN IMPASSE

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b) & (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) As described by OSCE, the October 12-13 Joint Control Commission (JCC) meeting in Vladikavkaz produced few real results because the Georgians and the other sides deadlocked over the Georgian proposal to change the format of the discussions. The commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) presented a report blaming both sides for an increase in violations. The only bright spot in the meeting was all participants' welcoming of the recently launched economic rehabilitation project in the region. Russian representatives told OSCE privately that they believe hardliners have taken control over policy making in Georgia. End Summary.

Airing the Differences

¶2. (C) OSCE Deputy Head of Mission Veselin Nikolaev told us October 16 that getting the participants to the Vladikavkaz meeting was a saga in itself, given the Russian closure of the Upper Lars-Kazbegi border crossing and air routes, and was resolved only at the last minute when all sides agreed to a charter flight from Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz. Once there, the discussions made little progress. The Georgians insisted on changing to a bilateral format (Georgia-South Ossetia), with OSCE chairing and Russia, the U.S., and EU as participants, before discussing agenda items on a settlement of the conflict or on law enforcement cooperation. The other sides strongly resisted this change, with the Russian co-chair commenting that he felt he was attending the "funeral of the JCC." Nikolaev told us that, given the starkly opposed positions of the sides, he thought invoking the "political format" of the "authorized delegations of the sides" might be a face-saving way out of the impasse. When this was proposed, however, the Russians said they had no instructions. The Russian co-chair told Nikolaev privately that, while he personally had no objection to the proposal, he thought Moscow was unlikely to accept it.

¶3. (C) Nikolaev said the JPKF commander, General Kulakhmetov, delivered a report to the JCC on the increasing number of violations of existing agreements, blaming the South Ossetians primarily for construction of fortifications and the Georgians primarily for unauthorized police checkpoints. The Georgians dismissed Kulakhmetov's report as biased. Nikolaev admitted to us that Kulakhmetov had seemed particularly careful not to anger the South Ossetians in his remarks, adding that he would have a better understanding of Kulakhmetov's overall assessment when OSCE obtains the written version of the report. Nikolaev said there was one bright spot in the discussions: all participants welcomed the recent launch of the donors' economic rehabilitation program in South Ossetia.

Russian Conspiracy Theories

¶4. (C) Nikolaev said the Russian representatives had told him privately in Vladikavkaz that they believed Georgian co-chair Merab Antadze's uncompromising stance at the meeting indicated he was under the control of Defense Minister Okruashvili -- and that they believed Okruashvili had gained the upper hand over President Saakashvili. Nikolaev told us he personally found this "far-fetched," especially the Russians' speculation that an incident might be arranged (apparently by Okruashvili) to remove Saakashvili "as happened with the late Prime Minister Zhvania." (Note: Zhvania died in 2005 from accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. End Note.) Nikolaev said the Russians frequently make such comments about Okruashvili, on whom they appear to be "fixated." Nikolaev said he spoke in Vladikavkaz with some of the evacuated officials from the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi, and they predicted the Embassy would go back to full staffing as soon as some event provided a public justification for it.

Comment

¶5. (C) There was no discussion in Vladikavkaz of when the JCC might meet again, although Nikolaev thought that the planned visit next week of Belgian MFA representative Pierre Chevalier to Moscow, Tbilisi, and South Ossetia might push things forward. For now the talks are in stalemate, with OSCE working to preserve the JCC as a forum for dialogue, if nothing else. None of the other participants seem equally motivated to keep discussion going, although none want to be seen as responsible for scuttling it either. At this point the economic program -- complete with its steering committee incorporating the sides and international donors -- is the only forum that seems to have broad, enthusiastic support.

TEFFT